ViaVoice 10 Pro USB Will Listen, Sort Of

"Of the three major outbreaks systems the future Mac cost X is probably trout of the greatest mystery." That's what ViaVoice 10 Pro, the new version of IBM's dictation software, heard as I read to it from a recent *CPU* article. (The article actually reads "the future of Mac OS X is probably shrouded with the greatest mystery.")

ViaVoice 10 is designed to let you speak in order to control your computer and dictate word processor documents, email messages, and other text. There are two main features of the program: operating the computer by speaking commands and dictating documents.

Speech recognition is an incredibly complex process, and no one expects it to work perfectly, but ViaVoice often proves too frustrating to use at all (although its output is often amusing).

You'll need an audio input device to use the app; the program bundles with a comfortable Plantronics USB headset that provides a microphone with stereo sound. The program also supports other input types, such as audio files imported from some handheld digital recorder models.

Before you can use ViaVoice, you need to train it to understand your voice's particular inflections by reading stories aloud. The more you train the software, the better it should be able to work. However, it takes 15 minutes to a half an hour to read each training story. After I trained ViaVoice with two stories, the software was able to understand such commands as "Start program Microsoft Word" and "Change the third paragraph to font Arial," but the quality of open-ended dictation was poor.

Dictation quality increased slightly after further training—be prepared to spend a couple of hours to fully train the software—but wasn't enough to make ViaVoice an entirely productive tool. You can dictate into SpeakPad, ViaVoice's word processor that's optimized for dictation, or into any other application, including Microsoft Word and Excel. But you can't just read from a page. You'll find yourself keeping a constant eye on the program's output, uttering "scratch that" and "correct" dozens of times even to dictate a few paragraphs. Background noise, such as a home's central heating or other voices in the room, often further confuse ViaVoice.

Besides voice training, the program can learn the sounds of words that you use that aren't in its vocabulary. So over time, the program should learn that "Mac OS X" isn't "Mac cost X." You can also purchase additional vocabulary sets for legal and medical use. To help you along the way is Woodrow, an obnoxious animated pencil that makes Microsoft Office's Clippy seem virtuous in comparison. (Luckily, you can disable Woodrow.)

ViaVoice's commands are available anytime via a toolbar or by speaking.

The Natural Language Commands—commands to control the computer itself—work well because ViaVoice only has to work from a relatively small set of preset commands, compared with the vast and unpredictable language that could occur in dictation. I could launch Internet Explorer and surf the Web reasonably well by saying the names of hyperlinks and a handful of other commands, such as "back" and "home." I could also use voice commands, such as "Schedule a one hour meeting with Fred on Monday," to add an appointment to Outlook. There are quite a lot of built-in Natural Language Commands, but they're not expandable, so you can't use your voice to control an application if support isn't built in.

The program is compatible with Win98SE/Me/2000/XP. If you'd like to experiment with voice recognition but don't want to spend $190, there are less expensive versions to choose from, including a $30 personal edition.

With enough training time and patience, ViaVoice could be a useful input alternative for those unable to use the keyboard or mouse. If you're hoping for a faster alternative to typing in order to get information into the computer, ViaVoice will prove to be a frustrating experience. Is ViaVoice right for you? The answer is a trout of the greatest mystery. ▲

by Kevin Savetz

Woodrow wore out his welcome even faster than Clippy did.

ViaVoice 10 Pro USB
IBM
www-3.ibm.com/software/speech
$189.95 ($89.99 upgrade)

CPU Ranking: 0 = Absolutely Worthless 2.5 = Absolutely Average 5 = Absolutely Perfect